

Research Paper



Wilkie collins's the woman in white: the portrayal and identity of women in victorian era

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ABSTRACT

Wilkie Collins is an English sensation author and pioneer of detective fiction; he is renowned for his mystery and narrative technique. This study examines and portray the Victorian Age women and how the society's expectations modified their identity and oppressed them till attaining their desire through Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White novel. As in the Victorian era, this novel portrays the women are considered as subordinate and inferior to men who are considered to preserve socioeconomic empowerment. The patriarchal and gender restrictions that most Victorian women overcome to become independent. This paper evaluates the life of Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe who are the leading female characters in the novel. They suffered from internal and external interferences and challenges, especially from their family members and society to expose their identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is achievable only if all the women are joining together and make the decision to empower themselves. In order to make women strong rather than weak, a movement for their

liberation must acquire. Simone de Beauvoir has provided a comprehensive analysis of the current state of women's affairs, as "The women of today are use a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity: they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being" [1].

Women's empowerment is essential to a society's basic growth; they are either illiterate or educated, that makes no difference. Despite the fact that women are biologically weaker than men; traditional societies make them appear completely weak in order to promote an idealistic view of men. Because they must stand by the rules and restrictions of life that man has created, they always appear oppressed and dissatisfied. Since societal norms, values and beliefs are linked to empowerment, various civilizations exhibit empowerment in different ways. The laws must be strict and applied wisely in order to highlight the improvement in women's status [2].

Economic independence, social inclusion, political engagement, better health and education are the five main pillars of women's empowerment. Economic independence gives the chance to independently earn their own money and achieve financial independence. Economic empowerment offers women greater choices and authority to influence decisions that impact their life. Achieving social inclusion is essential to provide all individuals, regardless of gender, equitable access to high-quality services and the ability to take part in choices that impact their lives. Increasing the number of women in positions of decision-making across a range of industries is also essential. Women from all backgrounds and social systems will see real change if an atmosphere based on respect, acceptance, and equality is raised.

Women must have educational opportunities that help them to become successful leaders and take good decision-making at all levels. Fewer women than males are entering the political sphere, there is a greater need than ever for female politicians to have equal opportunities. It is crucial to develop programs that promote greater female representation through movements like women's assemblies and leadership development in order to close this gap. In order to truly empower women, women's diet and health are essential. A nutritious diet, regular physical exercise to enhance one's general well-being, and appropriate access to medical services are all necessary for good health [3]. Additionally, the lack of resources for proper nourishment has a significant impact on women who are struggling financially. Investing in women's health through initiatives like health awareness campaigns and supplying wholesome food might help lessen the unequal nutritional issues that specifically impact them. Women's empowerment is greatly aided by education, which gives them the chance to acquire the abilities and necessary information to realize their full potential. Women have more financial options in the workforce and are more confident in their skills when they get education about personal health, leadership, and money management. Furthermore, having access to education gives women the confidence to question established norms, take part in family and community decision-making, and actively participate in local politics and civil society initiatives.

Table 1. Female and Male Education Percentage in Rural and Urban Areas of India

Year	Rural			Urban		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
1951	4.87	19.02	12.1	22.33	45.6	34.59
1961	10.1	34.3	22.5	40.5	66	54.4
1971	15.5	48.6	27.9	48.8	69.8	60.2
1981	21.7	49.6	36	56.3	76.7	67.2
1991	30.17	56.96	36	64.05	81.09	67.2
2001	46.7	71.4	59.4	73.2	86.7	80.3
2011	57.93	77.15	66.77	79.11	88.76	84.11
2022	65	81.5	73.5	88.8	92.2	87.7

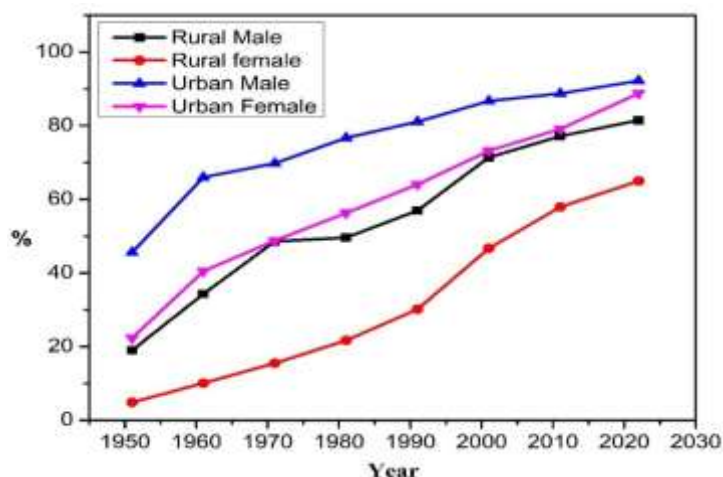


Figure 1. Female and Male Education Percentage in Rural and Urban Areas of India

As shown in Figure 1 in Table 1, the data analysis examines the trends in female and male education percentage in rural and urban areas of India from 1951 to 2022. The analysis highlights the progress made in education and identifies disparities between rural and urban areas, as well as between genders [4]. Compare to male, women's education percentage level is low in both urban and rural areas, because of that women face a lot of issues than male [5]. If women have a complete freedom to have education without any restrictions, they achieve high level positions in the society and live their life as their wish.

Wilkie Collins's nineteenth-century mystery and detective Novel, *The Woman in White* is known for its use of multiple narrators and a collection of first-person evidence, letters, and documents that serve to assemble the story, which was first published in 1860 and is set in the Victorian era [6]. Collins started his writing serials for Dickens's magazine *Household Words*; in Dickens' *All the Year Round*, his first significant piece, *The Woman in White* appeared in 1860. His best-selling works are *No Name* (1862), *Armada* (1866), and *The Moonstone* (1868). *The Woman in White* revolves around the mysterious Anne Catherick, a woman wearing a white dress who is filled with secrets, deceitfulness, and a quest for truth [7], [8], [9]. It also explores issues such as identity, insanity, and Victorian society.

Victorian-era middle-class women are portrayed as innocent and pure, straightforward, and compassionate, and dutiful and submissive. However, educated women who are required to support themselves can pursue a few different careers and they are taught to sing, dance, play the piano, draw, read and write since they are thought to be less intelligent than males. Indeed, the women are not supposed to voice their thoughts on anything other than a very narrow range of topics, and they are not supposed to be seeking their own identities and aspiring to independence like the leading women characters in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. The women are rich and educated, but they have no rights to choose their life partner and could not live happily as their wish because of the males' influences [10], [11], [12].

2. RELATED WORKS

Collins' female characters serve as examples of the perils that women face in society. With a keen interest in legal rights, he highlights the ways in which women can be victimized by the judicial system. He fills his stories with supporting people that present a darker picture, even as he concentrates on the primary characters. Collins develops female characters that oppose the main protagonists, frequently using the defence to defend their behaviour, rather than only restating submissive victims who mirror the heroine's struggles. Although these characters appear to be the epitome of feminine purity, they are often ruthless and half-witted. Madame Fosco in *The Woman in White*, Mrs. Lecount in *No Name*, and Lady Lundie in *Man and Wife* are all examples of feminine duty forced beyond its limits [13]. His reformation of feminine demeanour is made possible by these supporting characters, who show a range of femininity and draw attention to the drawbacks of conduct-manual behaviour, regardless of how strictly patriarchal or frighteningly submissive they are [14].

The book undoubtedly helps contemporary women to understand the current struggles of the society. In the *Woman in White*, the males who surround the women are always oppressing them and tell them how to act, talk, dress, and so on. Collins has followed the footsteps of his Victorian contemporaries without copying or demeaning them. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, it has a compelling plot and well-developed characters from various social classes, whose identities are profoundly shaped by the novel's exploration of gender politics and class issues [15], [16]. This helps readers better comprehend the features of the time period and Collins's perspectives on particular issues. In addition to its document-based narration, the book clearly succeeds in drawing readers with its intricately woven plot and in-depth characterization. This gives the sensation a realistic immediacy [17].

The story revolves around the conflicts of two groups. One group assembles around Sir Percival Glyde, an aristocrat who works to conceal a mystery from others and to silence those who try to solve it, while the other group, with the narrator's and others' support, seeks to reveal the truth for Laura Fairlie's benefit. All characters are members of a certain social class and have a defined gender in order to avoid being silenced and destroyed, social status and gender tensions predominate throughout the narrative [18].

3. METHODOLOGY

Descriptive method is used in this study to examine the women's characteristics which helps to explore the internal and external conflicts whichever they have encountered throughout their life and also helps to analyse their strategies to overcome the oppressions. This method combines observation and data collection to assist researchers to better understand a particular problem and offer insightful information that might guide future study. This method gives a thorough and precise depiction of the characters and activities of a certain group or topic.

This descriptive technique method gives greater attention to "what" of the topic than "why". Without concentrating on why a specific phenomenon happens, the technique mainly aims to describe the characteristics of a specific segment. To determine the existing circumstances and underlying the research object, researchers frequently employ descriptive research. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative observation that assist researchers to examine every variable and do a thorough analysis.

The current research requires an effective evaluation of the women in various roles in order to arrive at an integrated conclusion; for that exploratory research is accommodating to derive qualitative information. The current research is based on qualitative research which is used to analyse how the women portrayed and how their identity is revealed in the novel *The Woman in White*; qualitative research is effective in that regard [19]. The paper defines each women character with accurate examples as shown in the Figure 2.

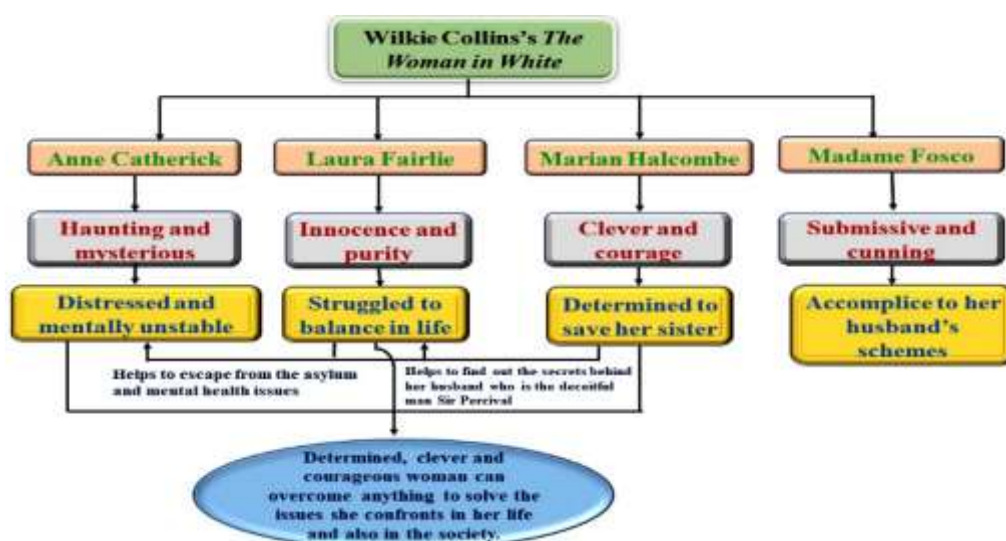


Figure 2. The flow chart defines each women character's identity and its results.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The women characters in the novel are Anne Catherick, Laura, Marian Halcombe, Madame Fosco, and Eleanor. Anne Catherick plays a major role in the novel; she is described as a gentle and ethereal woman who wears a white dress and has a haunting and mysterious appearance. She is portrayed as a distressed and mentally unstable character; her existence in a mental asylum and her enigmatic connection to Laura Fairlie are important aspects of her character. She plays a crucial role in the story which is leading the series of events; the plot revolves around her tragic fate and the mystery associated with her identity.

“This is the story of what a woman’s patience can endure and what a man’s resolution can achieve” [20]. Marian and Laura are half-sisters who live with their uncle until he forces Laura into marriage to a man whom she hardly knows as mysterious and incensed Baronet Percival. Laura Fairlie who is renowned for her extraordinary beauty, is brought up more independent, and her characteristics are typically associated with the women in the Victorian Age. Laura is a young woman who is described as gentle and beautiful, and she is frequently associated with innocence and purity in the novel. She struggles to balance her affection for Walter Hartright with her commitment to her family. Her engagement to Sir Percival Glyde is a major plot point, and she plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Her passivity and weakness make her an instrument for exploitation, and her misery provokes much of the story’s plot [21].

Marian Halcombe is Laura’s half-sister, and she is portrayed as determined, clever, and simple in appearance. She challenges traditional feminine ideals with her brilliance and courage; she is frequently compared to Laura’s attractiveness. She is a tremendously protective and loyal person and a crucial investigator in solving the mystery and has a keen mind. She plays one of the most ingenious and exciting roles in this novel.

Madame Fosco is characterized as a desirable, charming, and passive woman who appears to be submissive, but she exhibits a cunning and manipulative character. She is loyal to her husband and plays a significant role in carrying out their schemes; her role in the story is a willing accomplice to her husband’s schemes; her innocent exterior hides her true nature.

Eleanor is Laura’s aunt and guardian, who is a delicate but injured woman. She has a strong affection for her niece Laura. The main function of Eleanor in the book is to communicate with Laura about her relatives’ background knowledge. Her ill health restricts her engagement in the unfolding events.

These women characters in *The Woman in White* represent a variety of personalities and Victorian women’s social aspirations. While Laura and Anne’s innocence and vulnerability contrast with Madame Fosco’s cunning and manipulative nature, Marian Halcombe is distinguished as an influential and unorthodox character who questions conventional gender roles. The progress of the novel’s complex plot and themes depends heavily on each of the women characters [22].

Pykett states in his book *Wilkie Collins as the author* is a controversial novelist who critiqued the class and gender hierarchies of Victorian society; as a pioneering feminist, he depicts Marian Halcombe as a rebellious and independent woman which is a part of general exposure of the social constraints on women; and as a social critic, he has exposed the hypocrisies involved in creating and maintaining Victorian middle-class trustworthiness.

Collins uses the brilliance, courage, and physical attributes of Marian Halcombe to represent her as a devil; to emphasize Victorian stereotype of women characteristics, he portrays Laura as a purity of honest, angelic, weak, passive, and dependent woman that every man would love to marry her. Collins describes Marian as “She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead” [20].

“No father, no brother - no living creature but the helpless, useless woman who writes these sad lines, and watches by you for the morning, in sorrow that she cannot compose, in doubt that she cannot conquer” [20]. Marian takes the family responsibilities as a male to protect her sister Laura because they both have no father and brother to take care of their family; she lives in a false sense of freedom as a result of her uncle’s laziness. She leads her mother’s school, and accompanying business and has control over the home. It may be denoting that the women can take charge of their own lives, that equality is simple to achieve, and that women’s authorization is dependent on their wish because Marian’s job as the head of the

Fairlie household is shown without criticism, she does it so effortlessly. But she laments her inferior status as a woman in Victorian society as she narrates her experience “If I only had the privileges of a man... Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must respect the house-keeper’s opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way” [20].

Even she narrates freely as a man is nevertheless subject to the patriarchal language. Fosco acknowledges Marian’s uniqueness, foresight, and resolution when she defeats a man in the game of protecting Laura and overcoming the Victorian patriarchy twice by opposing to sign in the documents and obtaining a reason for dissolving the marriage after overhearing about misleading Laura’s property.

Marian becomes the typical Victorian woman under male authority after becoming ill; she is drugged and silenced for good, and used with freedom after being hidden in the abandoned wing of Blackwater to keep her under control, unlike Laura and Anne who are forcibly incarcerated into a mental asylum. As a respectable woman, Marian is compelled to remain in the family life such as caring for her sister and doing the housework. She is confined by domesticity and will never cross the lines of feminine territory of the Victorian era [23]. Marian is assented to the conventional role assigned to young women in the Victorian era without any resistance.

In the very last line of the novel, the main narrator of the story Walter Hartright portrays Marian as “the long, happy labour of many months is over. Marian was the good angel of our lives” [20]. Collins denotes that patience and obedience are the only thing to live a happy life through his depiction of domestic bliss. At the end of the discipline process, Marian is changed into a matron who tenderly cares for her nephew, and her identity becomes a devil to an angel, a humble, reliant, and obedient woman who readily gives up her individuality for her family.

Laura Fairlie is interpreted as a victimized woman, and the story revolves around her victimization which brings light to several social customs and inequalities that oppressed the women of the Victorian age. The novel portrays her as a victim in the following ways; Laura is forced against her wish to marry Sir Percival Glyde. She has little influence over this union, which is broken financially by her guardian Eleanor Fairlie, and her uncle Frederick Fairlie. Most of the women in the Victorian age had few options and little control over their lives, which is reflected in the lack of authority and temptation to marry for money.

Following her marriage, Laura finds herself alone at Sir Percival’s mansion in Blackwater Park. Her seclusion reflects society’s belief that women should be kept mainly in the home under their husbands’ authority. Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco threaten Laura and force her by using her fear and fragility as leverage, they force her to sign documents which against her interests. The absence of legal protections that women faced in that era is highlighted by Laura’s inability to resist these demands.

Collins portrays Laura’s emotional pain through the book. Her mental and emotional health suffers are result of her compelled marriage, the sense of helplessness and the mystery surrounding Anne Catherick. Her psychological anguish reflects the psychological harm that Victorian women have suffered because of social pressures, incarceration, and manipulation.

Throughout the book, Laura depends others for safety and support, especially Sir Percival Glyde, Walter Hartright, and her guardian. These men’s acts frequently determine her intervention and well-being. The social expectations of women in Victorian society are emotionally shown through Laura Fairlie’s character. Her hardships serve as a reminder of the lack of independence, social constraints, and gender-based discrimination that many women in that era confront throughout their lives. Through Laura’s character, the novel highlights the difficulties and weaknesses of the women in the culture where they required intervention in their lives.

In Victorian England, the social status was essentially fixed and the social classes rarely interacted with the people. Walter Hartright loves Laura Fairlie, but he is not equal to her social status, for that he could not ask her for their marriage. The deceitful Baronet man Sir Percival engaged with Laura partly because her father decides that she marry him. It shows that the women in Victorian England had influence of their husbands, fathers, and other significant males to designate their identity [24].

Laura Fairlie’s father’s last wish is to let her marry Sir Percival; he feels that this connection makes her feel grateful; in fact, Sir Percival’s offer is a little misleading. Laura’s duty to her father prevents her from cancelling the engagement. Despite Marian Halcombe’s ability and readiness to assume leadership

roles in some circumstances, Marian Halcombe is incapable in reacting physical and symbolical ways to the schemes which are developing around her.

To safeguard Sir Percival's greatest secret which is he is not an inheritor of either a title of Baronet or an estate, he placed Anne and Laura in the crazy asylum. Anne's mental health issues and social standing prevent her from resisting or even talking to others about their confinement, while Laura's mental illness prevents her from doing so for her well-being. The two women manage to get away; Anne entirely by herself and Laura with the help of her sister. When Laura is committed to an insane shelter and replaced with Anne Catherick by Sir Percival and Count Fosco, her identity is practically stolen. Therefore, neither woman needs a male to reclaim their independence [25].

At the end, Laura is hospitalized at the asylum under the name Anne Catherick after she eventually leaves her husband. There is no question that Laura is changing into Anne throughout this period since they seem similar than they did at the beginning of the novel. They have comparable mental states, and Laura has become more like Anne because of her deteriorating mental health, which has caused her to lose some of her angelic beauty. When Laura escapes from the asylum, she is a mentally unstable and broken woman as a result of her former husband's persecution [26]. Her deteriorating character is evident throughout these phases as well as in her life in London, where she is unable to assist Marian and Walter or herself.

Marian represents a self-reliant and independent woman who shows no interest in getting married. She is Laura's caregiver throughout the novel and is the stronger of the two. Although Laura and Walter are currently happily married and have a son, Marian take care their son, not Laura. Collins does this by revealing contemporary and maternal aspect of Marian who demonstrates her more feminine and compassionate side by being a motherly protector, but she is also capable of taking care of herself and does not require marriage to be happy.

As a writer of the Sensational genre, Collins never scared to tackle topics like these, which were viewed as challenging and even unthinkable by society [27]. Through these physical displays of affection that Collins challenges the Victorian view on sisterhood and the stereotypical Victorian woman.

5. CONCLUSION

Collins portrays that sacrificing one's societal identity is equivalent to losing one's complete sense of self because identification and public recognition are strictly related to each other. Marian feels grateful to take care of her half-sister, Laura. She encounters social burdens and restricted predictions due to her status as a spinster, and she feels it is difficult to communicate her feelings and desires, even though she is a courageous woman. For Laura's welfare, she assists her in getting out of the forced marriage and works together with Walter Hartright to reveal Sir Percival's real identity and wrongdoings and bring out the justice. Her relationship with Laura and Walter gives her personal growth, satisfaction, and personal fulfilment. Laura develops a strong relationship with Walter who supports her in her quest for freedom and helps her to discover the truth. She leaves her husband and starts a new life with Walter which is her previous wish. She confronts the issues and finds the strength to overcome them; her character changes throughout the novel.

Wilkie Collins's discourse of protest against patriarchal Victorian tyranny is demonstrated by his manipulation of Marian's character which is not portray her as a practical example of women's enslavement but an independent woman. Through the tragic and symbolic chess games with Fosco, Marian challenges Victorian patriarchal rhetoric; yet, she is ultimately quiet, disciplined, and made into the ideal "Angel in the House". In the end of the novel, neither gender roles nor equality will have been altered, but persuaded that the only options are submission, sacrifice, and resignation to live a peaceful life. Through the book, Collins clearly demonstrate the Victorian women who should adopt a mindset of isolation, passivity and acceptance.

The women in the novel attempt to overcome the cruel social norms to live their lives. The patriarchal characteristics and gender inequality let the women to be in insane; their attempts to obtain freedom from society's expectations let them face a lot of challenges and conflicts, and their identity is changed throughout their lives. By being conscious of their oppression, taking initiative and seizing

opportunities to change their situation, the women empower themselves. They transform their mindset in order to empower themselves. They need to understand that they are not to be presented with opportunities, but they would need to figure out how to make the opportunities. To regain their important place in society and civilizations, they have to fight back. To have their rights and uphold equality and justice in society, they must succeed. They must give their great effort to eradicate poverty, dowry-related issues, illiteracy, and the successful execution of all laws and programs which are affecting women.

To be an empowered Woman, she should have freedom, faith, and self-worth that help her to attain her desire and have good position in society. Every woman has fundamental right to empowerment. Women's rights to participate in politics, economy, education and society should be equivalent. They are permitted to pursue higher education and are treated in the same manner as males.

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Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Dr. Gokulapriya T	✓			✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		

C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed Consent

For this study Informed Consent is not applicable.

Data Availability

The information collected from the original novels of Wilkie Collins, related articles, thesis and web sources. All the sources are noted in the Reference section.

Ethical Approval

"I, the Corresponding Author, declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

I would like to draw the attention of the Editor to the following publications of one or more of us that refer to aspects of the manuscript presently being submitted.

I can confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved me and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed.

I understand that the Corresponding Author is the sole contact for the Editorial process and progress, submissions of revisions and final approval of proofs.

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